

The Adventures of the Pioneer Women on the Alternative Fuel Trail By Adrian Farley

It was a couple of weeks before the Granite State Clean Cities designation that we thought of the idea of taking Shelley's dedicated Honda CNG Civic 525 miles (one way) to the event. After all, Shelley bought this car because she believed in "Talking the talking and walking the walk". Christy Ficker and I hadn't really approached Shelley with this idea yet as we wanted to put out the word and then decide from the feedback if it could be done. The response didn't take long as Mark Riley emailed me and said not only can it be done, but that he had done a portion of the trip himself. He included directions and refueling stations that we could use along the way. When we thought about how few people had (or would) ever attempt this trip, we began to think of ourselves as the alt fuel pioneer ladies.

Our next step was to tell Shelley that it was possible to do....IN HER CAR! In the spirit of talking the talk...well, you get the picture; she decided the three of us should make this trip in her alternative fuel car. And that just the beginning of the story of how Shelley Launey, Christy Ficker and I became the 21st Century Women Alternative Fuel Pioneers trekking off on uncharted plains.

As every prudent pioneer knew, you just didn't get the horses together, put some supplies in the wagon and head out. No, you needed to become as educated about the territory and it's surrounding as possible. Do your homework, as there is no margin for error here. In addition, pack maps (charts?), books, directions, food, flashlight, (candles?) and be prepared to venture into territories that were unfamiliar and challenging. (No well-lit convenience store/gas stations out there for our alt fuel wagon.) The planning took hours of mapping and phoning to be certain stations were operating and the hours of operation, as well as how to pay for fuel.

The day before we left Arlington, VA, we called Jim Pryor, the contact for our first stop, to inquire about the PECO station in the Philadelphia area. He was happy to give us the pump code and let us fill up there. When he asked where we were going, I told him to New Hampshire for a designation to which his surprised response went something like, "You're going where? Well, good luck, ladies and my cell phone number is – just in case you need me." Thanks for the fuel Jim, can we call you from Boston?

We set out on the trail at 8:30 AM May 30th, just one day before the big event. Our adventures and experiences were many, our challenges and problems were fortunately few. But the pioneer ladies didn't set out without some minor fear and trepidation realizing that we were embarking on a trip that no woman has ever done without her man!

Our first stop was uneventful, 162 miles was not bad for our first leg. We found the refueling station just where Jim said it would be: off a lonely road, behind a Wal-Mart in one of the worst neighborhoods Philadelphia has to offer. We punch the 4-letter code

into the keypad, turn the pump on, fill her up (always comment on the quality of the fill when you start the engine) and get back on the trail heading for the next stop.

The next leg is going to be a long one, all the way to Connecticut before we could find fuel. Can we make it? That question is never far from your mind, but you have to trust the pioneers who came before you and the horse and wagon that has become your home. Our decision not to worry but sit back and enjoy the ride made the trip go quickly. The people we encountered along the way can't all be described here, but you'll get a sense of how the public on the Northeast Corridor reacted to our car and the signs on the car doors attesting to the fact that we were indeed driving something a little different from your every day vehicle.

Bless the Maryland Highway Dept and the JFK Expressway; they have hired senior citizens to collect the tolls at the booths. At our tollbooth, a little gray haired grandmother saw our Natural Gas Vehicle sign on the car and as she took our money she gave us a big smile and a two thumbs up sign. Christy said as we pulled away, "Do you think she knows we're pioneers?" "No". I said, "I think she's just remembering the first time she ever saw a car."

When we crossed the GW Bridge into New York City (now there's a place you'd never want to run out of fuel, I don't think they'd appreciate the "pioneer spirit") our tollgate keeper was a middle-aged lady with a bandanna on her head. She looked at our signs and immediately started telling us how high her gas heating bills were and just what could we do about it. We wanted to give her a contact name in NYC but thought better of it, we'd best flee, these natives are restless.

We ladies made it to Greenwich, Ct. without incident. More than a quarter tank of fuel left and 142 miles driven. Our directions sent us right into a residential area; we knew this couldn't be right so we pull into a gasoline station to ask for directions. What I really wanted to do was pull up to the tank and say "fill her up", but Shelley wouldn't let me...something about one of our signs says US Dept. of Energy and maybe they wouldn't think that was too funny. But the natives did gather around us, they were interested in our mode of transportation, would we pop the hood, open the trunk, answer questions about natural gas? All we wanted were directions to the next refueling station.

Gotta good fill didn't we girls? Now on to Hartford to see Donna at a great station right off the Interstate with bathroom facilities and snack food! Donna said when I called her "I'm open 24 hours a day and I'll be looking for you"... the natives up here are real friendly. I suppose Donna was a little disappointed that we didn't need much fuel as we had more than a half a tank, but we pioneers were starting to learn that to get to the next station, we would need more than a half a tank of fuel, so we topped off. While fueling at this Hartford station we filled next to a Natural Gas Yellow Cab, one of our stakeholders' companies and a National Partners winner for 2001. The cabbie loved his vehicle and enjoyed the positive comments as well as fears from some of his passengers. He had lots of entertaining stories including one about the guy who was about the light a cigarette in the back seat. Our cabbie friend turned to the passenger and said, "I wouldn't light that

if I were you, you're sitting on 3600 pounds of natural gas." The guy nearly jumped out of the cab before the driver could stop the car. Some people just can't take a joke.

When we got to the Massachusetts Turnpike we noticed signs saying propane was prohibited or something to that effect on the turnpike. When we got to the ticket booth, Shelley inquired as to the meaning of that sign and we were told that propane wasn't allowed on this road. Shelley smiled and said through her teeth, "Adrian, don't say a word, just keep driving." I don't know if we were legal or not, I just "kept driving."

The weather was bright and lovely for a New England spring day when we pulled into a brand new station just on the outskirts of Boston. The 9 hours so far had just been the best, our trail was well mapped out and the car was getting about 40-50 miles per gallon. Now I suppose every pioneer has to be prepared for the unexpected and sometimes "stuff" just happens. Well, it happened at this station. The equipment was new and better than anything we had seen for 350 miles. The nozzle was a little different from others that we had seen so Shelley and I spent some time reading the directions while Christy videoed this experience as she had been doing all along. We finally figured out how to get the nozzle hooked up to the car and we were getting a great 100 % fill. We knew this because the panel on the pump told us we were. We felt like the major gas stations had nothing on us....except maybe flush toilets. When we finished filling, I shut off the pump and removed the hose from the car. At that point there was an explosion that sounded like we were standing too close to the fireworks on the 4th of July. I looked over at Shelley who was holding her ears and heading anywhere but toward the car. I looked at Christy who had all but dropped the video camera and had said a couple of words that we would later delete from the film. In a few seconds, Shelley came running over to me and said in a loud voice because she was practically deaf, "What happened? Is my car alright?" I'm always touched by the concern good friends have for one another in the face of danger so I said (in a rather loud voice so she could hear me) "Shelley, your car is just fine and so am I!" We soon saw at the top of the pump, a small hose disconnected and dangling from a small metal fitting. The pump across from ours had the same fitting but was held in place by a clamp. We figured that 3600 pounds of pressure had blown our clamp to who knows where. This was a minor inconvenience and no harm was done, not to us and especially not to Shelley's car! How did pioneers live without cell phones? We used ours to call the emergency 800 number listed on the pump and just mentioned that we needed this pump again in less than 24 hours on our return trip. At this point, we got ourselves into the car and headed north...oh yes, we got a great fill!

We arrived at the in Portsmouth, N H at 8:30 PM after 4 fill stops and 12 hours on the trail. We even got there before the restaurants closed so we headed downtown to the lovely Market Square and got some real food. Our hotel was in Portsmouth and the morning event was 10 miles away at the University of New Hampshire. We had to be mindful of how much natural gas we were using to get to these places because our next fill up was to be south of us just "outside of Boston" and we knew what shape we had left that station in!

The Granite State designation of May 31st was an inspiring and flawless event. There were many fine speakers who support the alternative fuel program and were represented by those from the mayor's office, the governor's office, the state senate office and the Senator's office. DOE had a good turn out too and we were proud to be part of a designation that so many had worked so hard to achieve. Our little contribution of blazing the trail was recognized during the event and Shelley's car was on display outside the conference center with several other alternative fuel vehicles. Several people in attendance wanted to know the story of how we had made the trip. Some smiled and congratulated us; we smiled and thought; now we have to reverse the trip and its 1:00 in the afternoon!

It was 2:00 PM before we could break away from the crowd in NH and head for home. We knew we were in for a long day and we were determined to make it the 525 miles back to DC that night.

One of the problems with the Boston station was that even though there were signs off I-95 indicating that there was CNG at this exit, (first time we had ever seen that), there was no sign or easy exit to the station from our southbound direction. We had no choice but to get off the Interstate past the exit and return by merging into very heavy north bound traffic in order to return to the fill station. When we reached the station, we noticed with relief that our 3600 psi pump had been repaired. A quick check at the pump showed a clamp in place so we were encouraged that repairs had been made during the night. We could fill up and be on our way. Shelley gave me the honor of doing the fill up as she stood back (a safe distance) and we did get a good fill. As I removed the nozzle, you guessed it...the same explosion, as the new clamp still couldn't hold the pressure. Call the 800 number and get out of there!

On our fill up in Hartford, Shelley chatted with yet another Yellow Cab driver, but he was less than pleased with his CNG vehicle. He was pleased with the performance but felt that coming to this one station to refill each time was a pain. We did see two other dedicated CNG Hondas from the city fleet refilling there so we think that this station gets a lot of CNG business.

Stopping in Greenwich for the second time in 24 hours, the station owner, Chris ----who had received our earlier phone call and assured us he'd be there, treated us with a fill up. He was a former stakeholder for in Clean Cities and wanted to chat about the program and those people from DOE in New England whom he had dealt with. His station sells 800 gallons of CNG per month and he loses \$500 per month on that pump. I suppose he makes up for it with the 180,000 gallons of Exxon gas he sells each month. He keeps the CNG open for two reasons, he believes in the future of alternative fuels and he considers himself an environmentalist. The majority of his CNG sales are to Yellow Cab out of Hartford who refuel on their way the New York City airports. Chris gave us the directions to the best Italian restaurant in the area. This was the highlight of the trip home!

We got around NYC without any trouble. However, we were keeping our eye on the horrible lightning storm and the dark clouds that were threatening to ruin our next fill up. You are probably starting to get the idea that these stations are not covered or well lighted so a downpour could dampen more than our spirits. The New Jersey Turnpike was long and dark. We were really getting tired and anxious to get to our last fill up and head to DC. We found Philadelphia, but had a little trouble reversing the directions and finding the station at 11:30 in this awful neighborhood. We asked directions of the first seemingly reliable person who looked like he knew this part of town; a limo driver with car trouble and a group of high school kids standing around the car. At this point we are as low on fuel as we have been the whole trip, past a quarter of a tank. So when we asked for directions, we turned off the engine and we had long since been driving without air conditioner for conversation reasons. I don't believe that pioneers had air conditioners so we made the sacrifice! We took down directions and as we pulled away, Mr. Limo driver said, "Ladies, lock your doors, you're not in a great part of town." No joke!

We found the station before the storm found us, and by this time it was 12:15 AM. We were very tired as we had now been on the return trip for over 10 hours. I went to the keypad to punch in the letters to start the pump and Shelley put the nozzle in place for the fill. I held my flashlight and punched in what I thought were the correct letters to start the pump. SusanBThomasJefferson . OK, SBTJ, a message came on the keypad: "bad driver" (You got that right!) Shelley is now worried, "this pump has to work, we need this fuel." I go to the car, check my notes, Oh its SusanBThomasEdison...I punch in SBTE. "I got my Tom's mixed up Shelley". From the pump I heard, "What? Oh, good, the pump is on!" We are hoping that easy sailing is just ahead but we still need to find I-95 south to get us out of here. Not that easy, there were no signs directing us towards the south and away from this neighborhood! We drove around and around for 20 minutes frantically reading every sign and trying to find someone respectable enough to ask for directions. Finally, we found a run down motel and fortunately the night clerk knew how to get us to the road that would take us safely home...in 3 more hours!

Epilogue:

Would I do it again?

Yes, I would after some time to recoup. But by then I will have forgotten the code again! Shelley and Christy would have to answer for themselves.

Did an alternative fuel vehicle it add time to the trip?

Yes, we figured it added 30-45 minutes to each of our four stops; the refueling was quick and easy. The time was spent finding the stations and returning to the major roads.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important planning was for this trip. Without the Mid Atlantic Alternative Fuel Locator booklet, some information about stations in the

New England area from Mike Scarpino and others, there would have been no way this journey would have been successful. Calling ahead to the stations even after we were on the road was an important key to finding fuel and station locations as well.

Our experiences with the public we encountered were overwhelmingly favorable. I would say that only a small percentage of the people we came in contact with knew immediately what we were about. They all listened with interest to the explanation of our signs and of the program we represent, they agreed that this “alternative fuel thing is a good idea.” But most wouldn’t have understood that we were really modern day pioneers, after all we were just ordinary looking women driving an ordinary looking car.

Adrian Farley
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